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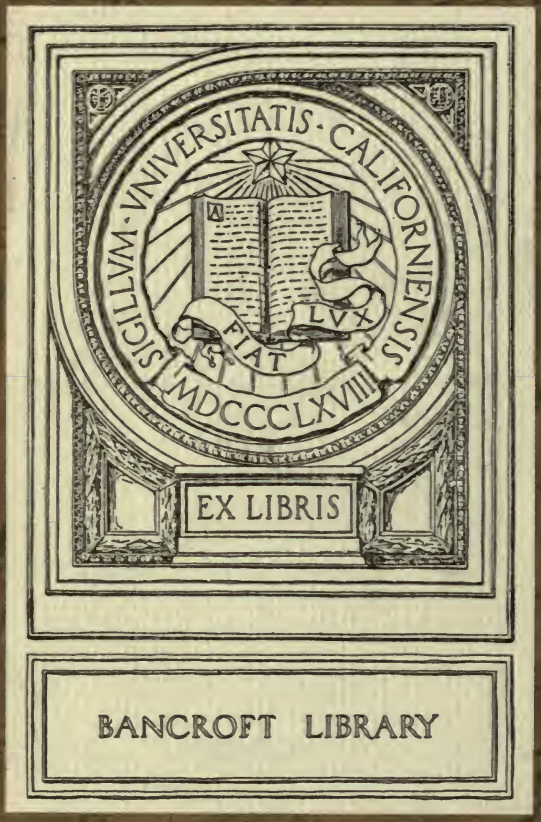

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BY

JEANNE ELIZABETH WIER

Reprinted from the Annual Report of the American Historical Association for 1910, pages 199–208

WASHINGTON
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By JEANNE ELIZABETH WIER,

Secretary of the Nevada Historical Society and Professor of History in the University of Nevada.

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THE WORK OF THE WESTERN STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY AS ILLUSTRATED BY NEVADA.

By Jeanne Elizabeth Wier.

The history of Nevada abounds in materials for historical investigation and interpretation. Its conception as a Territory in that miraculous union of the East and the West which followed the discovery of gold in California in the days of '49; its premature birth into statehood through the throes of civil war; its struggle as a weakling through the years of depression and reconstruction; the maturing of its life with its rebirth a few years since—these are topics of more than local interest. They are fraught with significance to the Nation, and as yet are but vaguely understood. In her sociological life Nevada has too often been the butt of criticism and denunciation rather than an object of study and a growing comprehension of the deep-lying causes which have thus expressed themselves in her life.

It is, therefore, not because of paucity of historical materials that I have chosen to use this opportunity to invite your attention to a problem the solution of which it would seem lies at the heart of all future prosperity in the historical work of the Pacific coast.

In defining the scope of this paper, let us notice first that the question is not one of anatomy but of physiology. While the western historical society may differ from its eastern sister to some extent in its mechanism, still here, as in other institutions, the vital question is not of form but of function. This is the more important in comparing two widely different sections of our country, since an eastern institution when transplanted to Nevada, for instance, is beyond doubt modified in its action by local conditions. In the second place, the word "western" is here employed in a different sense from the ordinary understanding of the term as currently used in New England and New York, or for, instance, in the classification of universities, as meaning everything this side of the Alleghenies. Any classification of American historical societies like that of the universities falls naturally into three groups: First, those east of the Alleghenies, supported for the most part by large private endowments and gifts; second, those of the Mississippi Valley, State-supported in sentiment and money alike; third, those of the Pacific slope, seeking State support, but for the most part not as yet on very solid ground.

Since "west" is usually in the broader sense associated with pioneer conditions, the societies of the third class alone would seem rightfully to belong to the western group. Comparisons will be made, then, between this distinctly western group and the other two divisions.

The Nevada institution is not considered as a type in the sense of being an average representative. It is chosen because of the writer's familiarity with its work and because, since in Nevada western conditions are exaggerated, the difficulties of western historical work are here most clearly to be seen and appreciated. Sometimes I have fancied that as the life of this desert State originated in a grand sacrifice, so throughout her history mayhap she is destined to perform her mission to the Union through the lessons inculcated by her adversities. Out of her problems of quartz mining grew the present United States mining laws; out of her barrenness has come an appreciation of the need of national irrigation projects; out of her struggles in an historical way may perchance come a more united effort for the conservation of historical forces.

All local and State historical organizations are alike in having for their chief function the collecting and preserving of historical data. All alike seek to investigate topics pertaining to the history of the State or locality, and, as far as may be, to publish the results in permanent form. All alike have had to overcome many obstacles in their first years, for all alike have been regarded at first as a luxury rather than a necessity. Here the similarity ends.

I shall seek now to outline the differences of the three geographical sections: First, as to the materials for historical research; second, as to equipment for handling those materials.

The question of data is one of quantity, one of quality, and one of location. With respect to quantity, it is at once apparent to the careful observer that our materials are scant as compared with those of the eastern and central regions. Not only is the West as a whole newer in historic life than is the East, but the migratory habits of its people have tended to destroy even that which once existed of historical data. The extreme of this condition is to be found in Nevada, where the typical mining camp is the victim of fires at such frequent intervals as almost to preclude the possibility of securing a complete file of any local records. Again, when not destroyed by fire, such camps are oftimes abandoned, or, more frequently still, moved to the site of a new bonanza, and this as readily as is the Indian campoodie or village near by. In such a removal only those things which are of utilitarian value are saved. The little printing press follows, as it always has done, the line of progress and discovery, but leaves too often its past achievement behind. I have sometimes thought that I should like to write the history of one of these printing presses of the desert which, like its owner, has been identified with

the life of so many of our most prominent camps. Even the county courthouse is not a fixture, but moves around for the accommodation of the bonanzas. What missing links are here, and we only marvel that the gaps are not greater when we recall the inadequate means of transportation which until recently obtained in the desert country.

In the next place, the materials are scant because much of the history of the smaller camps has never been recorded in writing. To many the printing press has never come. Ever and anon out of such isolated hamlets has come a hand-written sheet done by some miner in the evening hours by the light of a miner's candle, reflecting but dimly the corporate life of the community. Of such a nature was the famous Scorpion issued from the old log cabin at Mormon Station in Carson County in the early fifties. Sad to relate, not a copy of it exists to-day, but the Nevada Historical Society has later products of the same editorial impulse now within its archives. And then again there is the camp where not even the manuscript record exists, where no written record is ever made, save in the occasional letter penned to some friend on the outside, or the wildcatting article sent by a promoter to an outside newspaper in the vain hope of attracting others to the lonely spot. And even in those more populous camps where papers spring up like mushrooms in the night, two or three at a time, even here the spirit of gain so overshadows the life of the community that its real history is seldom written or preserved.

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Of formal history in such a State as Nevada there is little or ever has been, and that little has been produced as one of the many wildcat schemes to drag from the successful miner a goodly portion of his hoard of gold in return for a page of type and a full-page portrait of himself. A 3-foot shelf would hold all such works many times over.

As to quality, the newspaper is a proverbially unreliable source of historical knowledge, albeit a valuable adjunct even in the Eastern States; yet how totally dependent are we in the West upon the newspaper and the book of travels written by the casual tourist. In the larger centers of western life is found the more stable literature of the magazine, but in States like Nevada mining pays better than literature, and every attempt at magazine publication has thus far ended in failure. It is true that the "battle-born" State has had its journalists of note; its J. T. Goodman, its C. C. Goodwin, its H. R. Mighels, its Dan De Quille, its Samuel Clemens. For it was on the Territorial Enterprise at Virginia City that Mark Twain won his spurs, and of a truth, his "Roughing It" is the best history of the State which has thus far been penned. But then as now, in chronicling events, jest was mixed with earnest, and woe to the

person who with historical scalpel would seek to separate truth from error.

The quality of our western history is again impaired, as I have already intimated, by the fact that much of it has been written to sell. True, the same thing has been done in the eastern and central regions, especially as regards county history; but there such collections are local ones and only supplementary to the history of the State. Here they tend to displace all other history. Being in the nature of an appeal to the individual pocketbook, they are necessarily biographical in character. No mere process of addition will ever be able to convert those biographies into history. It is true that in the West more than elsewhere the individual has counted for much, as is the tendency in every pioneer country, and here better than elsewhere can we study the evolution of the individual. But in America, unlike Europe, the historical interest is in the masses, in that great sea of humanity in which the individuals appear only as types. To this ideal our western history must approximate or fail of its chief purpose; that is, the defining of our types of character. Let us not seek to prolong our heroic age beyond its natural termination.

And then as to the location of our historical materials. The East has passed into the era of domestication. Its historical food is close at hand. Its task is merely to absorb. The West is still in the hunting stage. It must run down its game before it can feast. What the result of its hunt may be is of great significance to the East as well.

In the East are States several of which could be set down side by side within one of our great western counties. In those States there is always at least one nucleus where for long years historical materials have been collected. In many cases there are several such places in one State. Each locality has a collection of its own and the student has no very difficult task before him when he seeks to utilize such records. In the central States such collections are now being made. Here in California much similar work has been done. But in States like Nevada the materials are still scattered far afield.

Sometimes as I have gone around on collecting tours under burning desert sun and midst winter snow, finding few of the comforts of civilized life, yet often the treasures for which I sought in manuscript or in the memory of the pioneer, I have found consolation in the thought of those explorers of old who in the days of the Italian renaissance spared neither trouble nor expense, for whom "no severity of winter cold, no snow, no length of journey, no roughness of roads," were a bar in the search for the things of antiquity. The East has passed through the first stage of her renaissance, that of passionate desire; through the second one, that of collection and

arrangement and the foundation of libraries; she is now in the third age of American humanism, the age of the critical use of her materials, and of the establishment, not of academies, but of societies for critical study. Here in the West we are but just coming into the first stage of the renaissance.

We grant that California, with her splendid universities, her organizations of native sons and native daughters, her pioneer societies, her greater industrial development, has kept better pace with the Eastern States. In her Bancroft Library she has a store of materials over which a modern Petrarch might well rejoice, but even her work of collection is not completed, and how shall she think to write her history while the side lights from the remainder of the Mexican cession and the Oregon Territory remain so dim? She may flatter herself that within that Bancroft Library repose the documents of the vast Pacific slope, but as a Nevadan I can testify that but a very small iota of the history of that Commonwealth is to be found in the collections of the Bancroft Library. What became of the manuscripts so carefully collected by Mr. Bancroft's agents in Nevada we may perchance never know. But we do know that it behooves us to seek to supply that deficiency by more vigorous work in reduplicating the materials which have been thus lost. And we do know that it behooves California, whose history is so bound up with that of the Washoe country, to be interested also in the recovery of the sources.

I come now to the consideration of the second great difference between the East and the West—the equipment for the handling of historical materials, which includes equipment for gathering, housing, cataloguing, and making available the data and at the same time creating a sentiment for their critical use. The difference here is all the difference between the compactness of the East and the vast expanse of the West, the difference between an agricultural, commercial, and manufacturing population on the one hand, and that migratory one of the "diggings" and the camp on the other. As the tide of population has rolled over these vast western regions, it has left here and there an isolated settlement. Under such conditions public institutions are but slowly established, social consciousness is but tardily matured. In a State where each individual man, woman, and child has from 1 to 1½ square miles to himself, how are you to evolve a common consciousness for the support of institutions for the common good? An insane asylum? Yes; and a prison, for the classes which are thus cared for are alike dangerous to society. An orphan asylum? Yes; for the miner's heart is proverbially large when it is a question of the protection of the weak. A university? Yes; for has not the Federal Government offered us an inducement to create an institution which shall bear the name

of university and draw the Federal moneys? An historical society? No; for what practical purpose may it serve, and the future is too far distant. Let the future take care of itself.

In the East the historical society also had its day of adversity, but there in those settled peaceful communities the pioneer remained where he had lived his life; there perhaps he bequeathed his property to the maintenance of historical work; there also the universities and colleges of the cultural type added the weight of their influence; there the newness of the West made the East seem old and revered by way of contrast; there a distinctly literary and leisure class furnished leadership in the enterprise. The Middle West caught the spirit and again there was an era of struggle while social consciousness was forming, and then the era of triumph in States like Wisconsin, where a six hundred thousand dollar building is now thought none too good for the State historical society.

Here in the West we are still in the era of struggle. In States like Nevada many of our pioneers have departed with their wealth; others are so widely scattered that no effective organization is possible. Our younger population, busy with the charge of practical work ever exceeding its power of accomplishment, seeks in its hours of relaxation not instruction but amusement. As a community, therefore, we have not reached a stage where we conceive of historical work as a natural and necessary activity, either of the State or of the locality. Unlike the East, we have no prospect of large private endowments; unlike the central region, we have no certain support from the State. The Nevada society, though a State institution, has during the past two years been left to private charity, and this partly through indifference and false economy, partly through blunders on the part of clerks. The aid of individuals has kept alive our work, but at what a sacrifice of historical data only those at the wheel may guess. This situation has been duplicated in other Western States at other times, nor is there assurance that in some one of our Western States it may not occur again.

As provision for the equipment for the work in the West is more precarious than in the East, so, also, is the need for that equipment the more urgent. The work of investigation and publication may wait, but to pause in the collection is to fail in our most important purpose. This work must be done now or never.

It would seem, therefore, to be a most important feature of the work of the western historical society to seek to create a historical consciousness. In order to develop a true interest in the past, we must interest individual citizens in the things of the present; we must seek to break up the feeling that the State is an artificial creation; we must make it a real organic thing in the eyes of the people, a something whose past history is precious because it has led to the present. We must make the historical society so minister to present

needs that it shall make the citizens of to-day more capable of understanding the events of the present. They must be made to feel that because of its existence the present generation will have greater wisdom of decision and greater sanity of action.

And while it is thus seeking to serve it must be cautious lest its acts be misinterpreted. It must seek to maintain a balance between its ideal of work and that which present conditions make possible—the old question of opportunism or principle. It must prove that it is not a mere scheme for the exploitation of State revenues. It must create confidence and trust through wise leadership, and it must transform what seems like private or personal interests into public policies. It must guard against the appearance of the demagogue. Its appeal must be to the people and not to the mob. It must keep out of politics, yet remain dependent upon politicians. Its connection with the State is of the very essence of its life, or, as President Pritchett has said of our State university, its danger and its opportunity. Thus, while it seeks to gain equipment for further work over an extensive and costly field, it must, without regular funds, cover that field and show by example what may be accomplished in the future. State legislatures, it would seem, act on the time-old principle that "to him that hath shall be given."

As the field is larger and the work more expensive in the West, so the problem is the greater. "What!" said a Nevada statesman to me the other day, "You ask for 1 per cent of the income of the State for your annual support?" "Yes," I replied; "and how large a per cent of that State income is being devoted to scientific research year by year and you never question the usefulness of the expenditure?" And another intelligent man not long ago queried whether in the course of a few years the work would not be completed and the expense stopped. How difficult, then, is this problem of the creation of historical consciousness which shall demand that present history shall be recorded as well as the past recovered.

The Western States are in all stages of progress with respect to such a consciousness. Some have gone far out on the skirmish line and are bravely holding their own against all enemies. Some, as California, have a tower of strength in the support of large universities. In other sections the universities are poor and feel unable to divide their attention and resources between scientific and historical research, or, while fostering that part of history which concerns the natural, the physical, and the applied sciences, they are forgetful of that residuum which remains and which has not yet been absorbed into the domain of political science, economics, and sociology.

But all the Western States have alike a great future work to perform in these first and second stages of our renaissance—in the creating of historical consciousness, in the collecting and preserving of historical data. Should we not seek to aid one another in this work?

Mr. Himes last year in his inspiring address on the unity of the Pacific coast dwelt upon that unity in the past. I to-day would emphasize the need of unity for the future. I do not mean that the branch any more than the national association should make large collections. I do not believe in any one general depository. Each State is an entity in itself, and this for geographical as well as for political reasons. Each State has expressed its life in a little different form from any other State. Therefore it has a history of its own and is entitled to its own collection.

But what we may and should have in common is a united purpose to use our mutual influence to aid in lessening the difficulties of our individual work. And then, when the State collections have been made and interpreted by the historical workers in the States, should it not be the function of the Pacific Coast Branch to distil, from the alembic of the parts, a something in the way of history which shall characterize the development of the whole coast, and to interpret that product to the Nation at large and to the world? For, next to its work of aiding the parts of its organization, it would seem to me to be the function of this branch to interpret the West to the East; to contribute to the East not merely the finished product of our research, but to convey to that East as well some sense of the difficulties of our field and of its richness alike. To be in New York at the annual meeting last winter was to realize how small is that comprehension to-day. As eastern capital, seeking extraordinary dividends, invests in western industrial enterprises, so perchance some day may eastern historical capital; thus perchance may the Nation at large. What the Morrill Act has done for scientific research, that may some future legislative act do for history.

As for Nevada, mayhap I have painted you a dark picture. But for Nevada there is hope. Her people are not less gritty and strong and resourceful than the sagebrush which covers her plains and her mountains. Her progress has been against fearful physiographical odds. We marvel that she has come so far as she has. The decline of her prison population and the lack of increase in her orphan asylum would seem to point to more stable conditions. The political progress she has made with respect to antigambling laws, primary election, referendum and recall, etc., would indicate that social consciousness is rapidly being developed in spite of isolation. As she seeks to establish more permanent industries in connection with her mines, she gives promise of less transient population. She is still a missionary field in certain respects. But the time may yet come when like England of old which was christianized from the continent, and which in its turn converted Germany, so Nevada may yet send her apostles to enrich other fields as in times past she has sent her bullion to build San Franciscos and New Yorks.